DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 220 905 CS 503 964

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TITLE An Alternative Approach to the Treatment of Stage Fright in the Required Public Speaking Course.
PUB DATE Nov 82
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (68th, Louisville, KY, November 4-7, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Anxiety; Behavior Modification; *Communication Apprehension; Higher Education; *Public Speaking; *Speech Curriculum; *Speech Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Stage Fright

ABSTRACT

Because students with stage fright are numerous, different from their college peers, and capable of being helped, the University of Illinois has created stage fright sections within the basic speech course. To meet the behavioral objectives of the course, the student should be able to define stage fright and recognize its common symptoms, describe personal symptoms and their physical and psychological causes, state and use methods for controlling stage fright, and exhibit normal levels of physical manifestations of stage fright during class presentations. These stage fright sections differ from others in the basic speech course in that students self-select them, only "satisfactory"/"unsatisfactory" grades are given, only 7 to 13 students are in each (as opposed to 18 in a nonstage fright section), no written examinations are given, and assignments stress discussion and group work, with performances focusing on only one skill. Graded assignments include dyad introductions, oral readings, shield speech, group project, demonstration speech, ad analysis, editorial review, and speech to persuade. Both pretest and posttest results and student evaluations indicate that the first semester of the course was a success. (JL)

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An Alternative Approach to the Treatment of Stage Fright in the Required Public Speaking Course

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An Alternative Approach to the Treatment of Stage Fright in the Required Public Speaking Course

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The management of stage fright has long been a concern for both teachers and students of public speaking. The pervasiveness of both the fear (as evidenced by its number one ranking on the list of most common fears in the Book of Lists),[1] and of the public speaking course make this a phenomenon that affects the lives of many. The purpose of this paper is to describe the program used within the stage fright sections of the basic speech course at the University of Illinois and to report the preliminary results. The paper is divided into four sections: a justification for the program, a description of the program, a description of the graded assignments and the preliminary results.

I - Justification of the Program

A course of study that is specifically designed for the stage fright student is justified for three reasons. First, a substantial number of students do suffer from abnormally high levels of public speaking anxiety. Studies have shown that approximately twenty percent of the students in a major university may fall into this category.[2] Second the stage fright college student has been shown to be different from the non-stage fright student. Low and Sheets report five characteristics that distinguish the two groups from each other.[3] Stage fright students:

1. Have not engaged in much platform speaking activity.
2. Have not participated in extra-curricular and social activities.
3. Have difficulty making adequate social adjustments.
4. Have less linguistic ability.

5. Have less interest in activities which involve self-expression and in work involving judgment and the supervision of others.

Survey results of the eight instructors of stage fright sections at the University of Illinois (during the past three years) very closely replicate these differences.

Third, there are data to support the effectiveness of at least two methods of managing stage fright. Various studies have produced results that indicate the methods of desensitization and group insight therapy resulted in reduced levels of stage fright.[4]

Since the stage fright student is significant in number, different from his or her non-stage fright peer, and methods to control the problem are available, it seems appropriate to attempt to design a course that will help the students manage their stage fright while also providing them with the knowledge and experience of public speaking many college and universities deem necessary to their education.

II - Description of Program

The first step in the development of a course for a specific audience is the establishment of a set of goals. Eight behavioral objectives were established including the following tasks which the student ought to be able to perform at the conclusion of the course.

The student should be able to:

1. Define stage fright.
2. Recognize common symptoms of stage fright.
3. Describe personal symptoms.
4. Describe physical causes of these symptoms.
5. Describe psychological causes.

6. State methods of controlling stage fright.

7. Use some of these methods to control stage fright.

8. Exhibit normal levels of physical manifestations of stage fright during class presentations.

In an attempt to meet these objectives the five stage fright sections differed from the thirty-nine non-stage fright sections in five ways.

1. Selection. Students self-selected the stage fright sections over the non-stage fright sections. Consultation with the teacher was recommended. It is, however, simply not feasible to tell a student who claims to have high levels of anxiety that he or she doesn't.

Verification of the selection process was obtained by the use of the Personal Report of Communication Anxiety.[5] McCroskey's test mean for college students was 114. The University of Illinois control group of non-stage fright students was 100, while the combined mean of the five stage fright sections was 127. Thirty-six of the forty-nine stage fright students scored higher than 114. This was taken as an indication that self-selection was an effective means of identifying particularly anxious students.

2. Grading. The stage fright sections are graded only on a satisfactory unsatisfactory basis. This is beneficial for two reasons:

a. Students without real anxiety who might be tempted to enroll thinking they will get an easy A or B are discouraged from doing so.

b. The negative aspects of grading are eliminated. This fosters an attitude of cooperation among students as well as between students and teacher. It also allows for flexibility in the type of feedback offered for each assignment. For instance, the class can decide for each assignment what type of feedback they desire. Options include

S/U, a +, or - system, letter grades, or a point system in combination with instructor comments.

3. Section size. The stage fright sections are smaller than the non-stage fright sections, 7-13 students compared to an average of 18. Three benefits resulted from this. First, the amount of speaking time per student was greatly increased. Second, the class became in itself a small insight and support group. This was fostered by the group assignment and in-class activities. Third, each performance was given before a small audience of familiar peers. The combination of the informal small group class setting and the frequent opportunity to speak was designed to combine some of the benefits of desensitization and group insight therapy.

4. Examination. Written examinations are not given. Since they are not needed for grading purposes, it is felt that the time giving and reviewing exams can be better spent in performance and application activities. The final exam period is used to hear final speeches which are viewed as an oral final.

5. The assignments and class activities. Required readings were assigned and discussed in class. In addition to the appendix on stage fright in the textbook (Fundamentals of Speech Communication, Bert Bradley, Third Edition) The two following books were put on reserve for student use:

a. Dickens, Milton. Speech Dynamic Communication. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963, 25-37.

b. Eisenson, Jon and Paul H. Boase. Basic Speech. New York: Macmillan, 1964, 268-276.

A seminar was conducted for the combined stage fright sections one evening during the second week of class. A psychologist from the Student Counseling Center conducted the seminar and dealt with the topics of anxiety, relaxation and attention.

The stage fright sections introduce group theory and group work early in the semester and thus encourage bonding and comfort among students. In the non-stage fright sections a small group assignment is the fourth of five oral assignments. In addition, the actual performance in the stage fright sections is given before an audience consisting of only the half of the class not in the student's group. The student is also not "going it alone." Both the responsibility for the project and the actual performance are shared.

Performances tend to be short, focus on one skill and are designed to be as non-threatening as possible. The shortness of each assignment contributes to the frequency of oral performance as well as to the non-threatening atmosphere. The assignments are designed to each emphasize the previous unit of study. While the focus is narrow, the assignments do become more comprehensive and culminate in a speech to persuade.

III - Description of Graded Assignments

Due to space limitations the course syllabus and the "Suggestions to Teachers" are not included here. Rather, what follows is a list of the "graded" class assignments and the purposes of each. Keep in mind that these are supplemented by class activities that provide an oral experience for each student almost every class period.

#1 Dyad Introduction

Description - Each student is paired with another. They interview and introduce each other to the class.

Purpose -

a. Allow the class to get to know each other.

(1) Each student will meet and talk with one other class member on a person-to-person basis.

(2) Each student will gain knowledge about individuals in the class that will be of later value for audience analysis and adaptation.

b. Give each student a relatively comfortable experience in front of the class. The introductions are given in an informal setting while accompanied by another student.

#2 Oral Reading

Description - Students prepare one of their favorite short pieces of prose or poetry to read to the class.

Purpose -

a. Offer students an opportunity to relate oral skills to written material.

b. Give students experience in an activity they may later perform as parents, teachers, club members, etc.

c. Give students an opportunity for "public speaking" in which they are not responsible for the content.

d. Encourage using the ranges of vocal factors.

e. Encourage effective use of the voice.

#3 Shield Speech

Description - Students prepare a shield or crest that symbolizes their goals, hobbies, family background, personality, etc. While seated in a circle, each student explains his or her crest and its meaning.

Purpose -

a. Give students a speaking experience in an informal setting.

b. Give students a speaking experience based on a topic they know well - themselves.

c. Give students experience using a single visual aid.

d. Preview the topic of organization by assigning a speech that is pre-structured based on the division of the shield.

#4 Group Project

Description - The class is divided into two groups of 6-7 students. Each group chooses a product and designs a campaign with which to sell it to the class. The campaign is presented during 40 minutes of class time.

Purpose -

a. Allow the observation and application of group theory in a real life situation.

b. Encourage a broad view of communication, one that realizes there are various ways to accomplish a purpose.

c. Encourage creativity and the utilization of each student's skills.

d. Encourage friendships among students.

e. Give students a performance opportunity that includes group support and a small audience.

#5 Demonstration Speech

Description - Students prepare an informative speech which includes a visual demonstration. The speech is video-taped.

Purpose -

a. Give students a speaking experience that is similar to those found in a student's out-of-class life.

b. Emphasize visual delivery.

c. Encourage purposeful movement as a means of relieving tension.

d. Give experience in the use of more than one visual aid.

e. Encourage students to think of informing in a sequential manner and use this to produce a well-organized speech.

f. Allow students to view themselves while both speaking and moving. The timing of the taping seems appropriate both because the students have had some successful experiences and thus some new confidence and because there are three assignments left in which to apply what is learned from the taping. Taping is done in front of the entire class, but the playback occurs with only the half of the class that was taped the same day, and the instructor. The setting is relaxed and informal and each student has the opportunity to give and receive feedback from both teacher and peers.

#6 Ad Analysis

Description - Students select a newspaper or magazine ad that uses both emotional appeal and evidence. While seated in a circle they give an analysis answering such questions as - What is the specific purpose? What emotional appeals are used? What types of evidence?, etc.

Purpose -

a. Encourage awareness of a type of communication (advertising) that is important in the student's life.
b. Give practice in recognizing the purpose of ads.
c. Give practice in recognizing emotional appeals.
d. Give practice in identifying and evaluating evidence.
e. Provide a speaking experience that is limited in scope and relevant to the audience.

#7 Editorial Review

Description - Students select a newspaper editorial and prepare an analysis and evaluation of the reasoning. Informal oral reports are presented to the class.

Purpose -

a. Acquaint students with a frequent use of reasoning in their daily lives.

b. Encourage the testing of reasoning found in editorials.

c. Encourage students to become critical consumers of persuasion.

d. Provide practice in recognizing main ideas, types of reasoning and reasoning fallacies.

e. Provide experience reporting the results of analysis and evaluation.

#8 Speech to Persuade

Description - Students choose a topic and present an extemporaneous speech to convince or actuate.

Purpose -

a. Give students a comprehensive view of persuasion.

b. Give students a longer and more formal speaking experience.

c. Encourage synthesis of course material by requiring the application of all course topics in order to produce a successful persuasive speech.

IV - Evaluation of the Program

Two types of evaluative data are available from the first semester of the program. The McCroskey speech anxiety test mentioned earlier was also used as a pre-test/post-test measure of effectiveness. The results are indicated below.

Mean Scores

	Pre-test	Post-test
Stage Fright	127	107
Non-Stage Fright	100	103

Not only does this indicate a significant drop in anxiety levels, but the post-test score is below that of the average college student. Only 10 of 45 stage fright students completing the test finished with a score above McCroskey's

mean of 114.

A second form of comparative datum is the Instructor and Course Evaluation Scores. This evaluation is obtained from all students at the end of the semester. The three global measures are reported below.

Instructor and Course Evaluation Scores*

	Stage Fright	Non-Stage Fright
Rate the Course Content	4.99	4.49
Rate the Instructor	5.53	4.70
Rate the Course in General	4.89	4.41

*Scores range from 1 (very poor) to 6 (excellent)

While admittedly there are numerous variables that could account for these differences, it is nonethless encouraging to receive even this generalized data and feel that "we must be doing something right!"

The course described here is merely a beginning. It can perhaps best be viewed as an application of the theories of audience analysis--a means of achieving the best possible fit between teacher/subject and student. By learning more about the sub-classes of students (stage fright, occupational choice, speaking experience, etc.) and then adapting the course to those audiences, we will hopefully best meet the needs of teachers and students.

Endnotes

[1]David Wallechinsky, Irving Wallace, and Amy Wallace, The Book of Lists, (New York: Morrow, 1977), p. 469.

[2]James C. McCroskey, "Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety," Speech Monographs, 37, (1970), pp. 269-277.

[3]Gordon Low and Boyd Sheets, "The Relation of Psychometric Factors to Stage Fright," Speech Monographs, XVIII, (1951), pp. 266-271.

[4]Representative Articles include the following: James C. McCroskey, D. C. Ralph and J. E. Barrick, "The Effect of Systematic Desensitization in Therapy Groups," Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 73, (1968), pp. 119-130.

G. L. Paul, "Two Year Follow-Up of Systematic Desensitization in Treating Speech Anxiety," Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 36, (1971), p. 410-421.

[5]McCroskey, 1970.